ENLARGING THE UN'S HUMANITARIAN MANDATE

Under-Secretary-General Jan Eliasson on the new challenges

The spread of large-scale political violence in a growing number of countries is a result, in part, of the forces unleashed at the end of the Cold War, and poses severe new challenges to the UN system and the international community's ability to provide quick and effective humanitarian relief. To do so will require far-reaching institutional changes in the UN, according to Mr. Jan Eliasson, Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs. He also contends that there is an urgent need to integrate economic rehabilitation and development concerns from the very outset of relief operations.

By IAIN LONG *December 1992*

Pressing humanitarian crises such as those in Somalia and the former Yugoslavia raged dangerously out of control partly because tested international mechanisms do not yet exist to respond to the kind of complex emergencies that are now erupting globally. This is the view of Mr. Jan Eliasson, the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs who coordinates the UN system's emergency relief operations.

"The world totally underestimated the forces that would be unleashed at the end of the Cold War," he says. "The Cold War had an artificial stability built into its respective camps, and the extreme turmoil we see now in places such as Somalia and Yugoslavia is a historic expression of forces repressed for a long time."

The Under-Secretary-General — whose position was created a year ago by the General Assembly as a result of widespread calls for a more effective UN response to the humanitarian crises — is convinced that the UN's relevance in the emerging international order will be determined in great part by how effectively it responds to the new challenges confronting it.

Providing emergency relief in situations of natural disaster is difficult enough, Mr. Eliasson notes, but the operations become infinitely more complex when the country is ravaged by political conflict, as has been the case in Afghanistan, Iraq, Liberia, Mozambique, Azerbaijan, Somalia, Sudan and the former Yugoslavia. Not only are the humanitarian problems compounded — from massive population displacements to the disruption of agriculture and economic life generally — but relief operations themselves face enormous problems of delivery and security, even when the resources are available, which is not always the case.

"Far-reaching changes internationally and within the United Nations are essential if the world wishes to minimize the suffering of populations trapped by civil-war induced starvation. Member states need to decide whether, and then how, the United Nations should be equipped to provide humanitarian relief in situations of large-scale violence.

"Where, for example, must the precise line be

Humanitarian crises amidst war

	Population (mn)		UN emergency appeals	
	Affected	Total	$mn	Period
Afghanistan	3.7	16.6	180	June-Dec '92
Angola	1.4	10.0	81	May-Dec '92
Ethiopia/Eritrea	9.2	49.2	200	July-Dec '92
Iraq	0.75	18.9	217	July '92 - March '93
Liberia	2.1*	2.6	150	Dec '90 - Sept '92
Mozambique	4.7*	15.7	250	May-Dec '92
Somalia	2.4	6	83	Oct-Dec '92
Sudan	7.8	25.2	141	July-Dec '92
Yugoslavia †	3.1	23.8	434	Sept '92 - April '93

* Including refugees in neighbouring countries. † Former

UNITED NATIONS

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UN humanitarian chief Jan Eliasson with child and armed guards in Somalia in September.

drawn between the humanitarian solidarity the world now demands for innocent populations caught in bloody conflicts and the compelling arguments of national sovereignty which have for so long dominated international thinking?"

In Somalia's "unique" case, this line was possible to draw: there was no effective authority checking the utter lawlessness which prevented relief reaching tens of thousands threatened by imminent starvation and death. But there will be many other crises where this "line" will not be so readily apparent.

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The changes currently being discussed would affect fundamental priorities of the UN and have implications for the recruitment and training of staff. They will require very serious discussions, among member states, as well as within the UN.

"At the moment, we are thrusting staff members trained in relief and development work into the midst of conflicts in which they themselves become targets of the combatants." Pointing to the recent killing of three relief workers and a foreign journalist in southern Sudan, Mr. Eliasson argues that the international community cannot allow such things to continue to happen. UN and other humanitarian workers have also been killed recently in Somalia and Liberia.

INTERNATIONAL PRIORITIES

Mr. Eliasson focuses in particular on three issues that he believes need much greater international attention:

- The need to balance accepted principles of national sovereignty with the demands of solidarity with those in severe distress;
- The urgent necessity to create more effective preventive, early-warning and quick-response systems to head-off disasters;
- The need to build-in the development dimension at a very early stage of relief planning and operations.

But these pressing issues notwithstanding, Mr. Eliasson says his greatest immediate concern remains the need to find quick measures to alleviate the massive human suffering that has escalated in Africa and other parts of the world, as more and more nations find themselves torn by civil wars. In addition to the famines in Africa and the war in former Yugoslavia, his office has also had to respond to numerous other disasters, such as the Cairo earthquake.

Besides Somalia, Mr. Eliasson points to several other African countries that are in need of substantial assistance: Mozambique, Liberia and Sudan. In Mozambique, there are fears that even if the peace accord holds, there still will be thousands dying of starvation because of the ravages of civil

war. And then there are also the Mozambican refugees who have had to flee the strife and the famine: a million who have gone to Malawi, a half- million who have crossed into South Africa in this year alone, and 40,000 who only recently fled to Zimbabwe.

In Southern Africa as a whole, however, Mr. Eliasson says good national planning and action, and a quick and well-coordinated international response, had averted what could easily have been a disaster after the severest drought to hit the region in 100 years. The generous donor response to the Southern African drought came despite widely voiced fears that "donor fatigue" was setting in. In Sudan as well, there had been important progress made during Mr. Eliasson's September 1992 visit, where he negotiated rights to 21 new flight destinations in areas controlled by the government as well as its opponents. Mr. Eliasson speaks also of the "energetic efforts" of the Secretary General's Special Representative in Somalia to try to negotiate agreements with the various military factions to facilitate an accelerated international relief operation.

THE RELIEF-DEVELOPMENT CONTINUUM

Using the response to the Southern Africa emergency appeal as an example of a wider problem, the Under Secretary-General says that while donors on the whole responded generously to the appeals for food aid, such generosity has not extended to urgent non-food areas such as medicines, clothes, blankets and water, or to *all* countries in need. Only 21 per cent of the non-food requirements in Southern Africa have been met, he says. In addition, Malawi, Swaziland, Lesotho and even Botswana are receiving less because donors are earmarking contributions for specific countries — usually the larger ones — and for specific items, rather than allowing the UN to allocate them as needed.

"We would like the donor community to think of the humanitarian objective all of us share, which

Balancing sovereignty and solidarity

While Mr. Jan Eliasson speaks passionately about the need for the United Nations to do much more in the humanitarian crises resulting from civil wars around the world, he is acutely aware that there is still wide agreement on one of the cardinal principles of international diplomacy: to refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of states.

"Given the enormous suffering we are witnessing around the world from such wars now, there needs to be serious discussions among member states, as well as in the UN Secretariat and the agencies, about the precise international role in providing humanitarian relief. We need to carefully define the line between the humanitarian solidarity the world now demands for innocent populations caught in conflicts and the compelling arguments of national sovereignty." Such a "line" will not always be as easy to draw as it was in Somalia's case.

Mr. Eliasson says that it is vital to guard against any diminution of the impartial and neutral character of the UN as an inter-governmental body. It is also necessary to respect the principles of international law and "the sensitivities of many countries, particularly the younger nations, who don't want to see their sovereignty diminished in whatever new mechanisms we create."

On the other hand, there is growing recognition that governments and parties at war have a responsibility for the welfare of their populations, and that the suffering of people is a matter of concern for the whole international community.

"If at this stage of history, with the ending of the Cold War and the beginning of a new era, we cannot put the welfare of human beings at the centre of all our concerns and operations, and really prove that the whole idea of organizing ourselves in societies and international organizations was to improve the conditions in which we all live, then we are failing humanity. So how we in the United Nations strike this balance is going to be crucial for the relevance of the United Nations in this new international environment."

In addition to legitimate sensitivities about sovereignty is the issue of "militarization" of humanitarian operations which a number of groups are concerned about. For the first time in history, the Security Council has adopted numerous resolutions establishing armed escorts for relief operations — in Yugoslavia, Somalia and Iraq — thereby integrating the humanitarian and the peace-keeping functions. "This is now a fact of life, and a sad one. But such escorts are clearly needed, as is demonstrated by the outrages being committed against civilians in so many conflicts right now."

is to fulfil as many of the needs for relief in whichever country they exist. Earmarking funds makes it harder for us to do this, and to reach countries which are not as much on the 'cooperation map,' so to speak, of the developed community. That gives us true humanitarian problems."

The problem of meeting non-food needs is linked in part to the lack of recognition that relief, rehabilitation and development form part of a single continuum. It would be artificial to draw borderlines between them. In Somalia, for example, "there is an urgent need to repair the water facilities and to restore electricity, which are often considered as non-emergency requirements. And yet if we don't deal with these problems in the emergency phase, we are causing enormous pain for the people, and an enormous displacement from their homes and villages." This in turn multiplies the cost to donors of providing emergency relief, who also become frustrated by recurrent emergency interventions "which don't deal with the root causes of the problems."

"So we must build in the development dimension in relief operations as early as possible." Emergency relief can be viewed as a humiliating handout for those receiving assistance "unless it builds an element of hope for the future." Mr. Eliasson says that he is particularly pleased, therefore, that during his September visit to Somalia, decisions were made on the spot by the UN Development Programme to establish offices in Mogadishu and Hargeisa. "These colleagues are working on such areas right now, but we need more donor support to be able to address such needs for other countries in the Horn of Africa. We need to do a lot more and a lot better in places like Ethiopia and Eritrea."

CONCERN FOR RELIEF PERSONNEL

If the UN is to become more directly involved in emergency situations involving civil wars, where anarchy and chaos reign, its role will require redefinition, Mr. Eliasson says. "I fear that we need to face up to the fact that we are dealing with a very complex international situation, where we will continue to see more ethnic and internal conflicts. We, as an organization of governments and states, will have to adapt to these new conditions."

Mr. Eliasson cites one area in which changes would need some discussion. "In the past the role of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), for example, was clear in a war situation, while the United Nations rather concentrated on development work after the war. Now, the UN is expected to remain amidst hostilities, like a captain on a sinking ship.

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"We find ourselves in this dilemma: on the one hand, in helping the population in need, of wanting to expand the role of the United Nations in these critical situations; but on the other hand, of running the risk of putting our own people's lives at stake."

If the UN is to assume a greater and more direct role in such situations of armed hostility, however, "a lot of changes will be required, and serious discussions will be needed among member states and within the UN secretariat on the definition, implementation and implications of this new role. And if we come to that conclusion, then I think we should do it wholeheartedly."

Parties engaged in civil war also have a responsibility, not only to their own populations, but equally to those bringing humanitarian relief to the suffering. "Parties to civil conflicts must be required to abide by a moral and ethical code of conduct which requires respect for humanitarian work. It is unacceptable that personnel of the UN, the ICRC and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have now become targets of fighting in places like former Yugoslavia and the Horn of Africa. The law of the jungle cannot be allowed to move into this area."

Such a code of conduct amidst civil strife should also forbid the use of food and other aid as a

weapon. This sentiment is reflected in the growing recognition that the international community should have access to those in need of assistance, through "humanitarian corridors," "corridors of peace" or "zones of tranquility." Since these are actually local and temporary ceasefires, they in turn could promote the peace process more generally. "Humanitarian diplomacy could thus be a dynamic new element in preventive diplomacy."

CULTURE OF COOPERATION

To help prevent complex emergencies, the UN needs to work out mechanisms of early warning and quick mobilization. Mr. Eliasson says that for the moment he cannot speak of dramatic breakthroughs as a result of his new office. "The problem right now is that the UN in the humanitarian field is vastly overstretched. We are jumping from one crisis to another, we are very few people, working many, many hours a day, and we have not had the possibility of focusing on the early warning and prevention side that we must turn to, and which, of course, requires work in the area of peace-making and preventive diplomacy as well."

But Mr. Eliasson believes that if the UN is successful in developing a more effective role in the humanitarian field, it will "send a message of hope to people who are, or will be, in distress as a result of internal strife."

Yet even with a strengthened capacity for humanitarian involvement, the United Nations cannot carry the burden alone. "We cannot solve all the problems. We need above all the cooperation of the governments, the parties involved in the different civil wars around the world. We need to deal with the root causes of the problems. We need to work with the NGOs. We need to work with the regional organizations.

"I hope that we will develop a completely new culture of cooperation, where we realize that in this world, with these gigantic problems of poverty, violence and environmental degradation, the only solution is a mobilization of resources. One actor cannot do it alone. The responsibility falls on all of us, and we should share this responsibility."

Mr. Eliasson stresses that his office has a coordinating role and does not have an operational brief. The establishment of the office in no way changed the mandates of the UN agencies which are active in relief work and for whose staff Mr. Eliasson expresses great admiration.

"But the pressures sometimes tell. In the face of unbearable human suffering, there is inevitable anxiety and nervousness about our abilities to meet the challenges, and that can cause some strains, even in-fighting. That is not surprising. So I would like to bring about an intensified culture of coopera-

UN/Steve Whitehouse

UN 'Blue Helmet' relief column in an area of war-ravaged former Yugoslavia. Protecting the distribution of relief supplies in such areas of conflict is a major new humanitarian challenge for the UN.

tion whereby the UN can not only project an image of unity but also benefit from such unity and coordinated action, which would in turn reduce internal friction. We all gain in working together, and lose when we don't."

Mr. Eliasson concedes that coordination inside the UN has always been difficult, given the mandates of the various agencies. "I do not ask for a centralization of power; we need to delegate authority in order to react quickly. But one thing is essential, which is that we must work in the same direction, and that there be a certain division of labour among the agencies and entities concerned."

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Mr. Eliasson has been given four instruments to bring about more effective coordination:

➤ First was the very creation of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, which elevated humanitarian issues to a high priority within the United Nations, linked closely to the Secretary-General.

➤ Second is the $50 mn Central Emergency Revolving Fund, to allow the UN to react quickly to disasters, even before appeals are issued, and to send a political signal that a particular need is critical.

➤ The third coordinating instrument is the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, which is to meet two to three times a year under Mr. Eliasson's chairmanship, with additional meetings of deputies.

➤ The last instrument for better coordination is the so-called consolidated appeals to donors, which eliminate the multiplicity of individual agency appeals and allow a process of coordination and prioritization. Consolidated appeals have so far been made for Southern Africa, the Horn of Africa, Afghanistan and former Yugoslavia.

Even with better coordination, Mr. Eliasson says the UN's work on complex emergencies cannot succeed without the regional organizations such as the Organization of African Unity, League of Arab States, European Community and others. UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali has frequently emphasized their responsibilities as envisioned in Chapter 8 of the UN Charter, Mr. Eliasson points out.

In conclusion, Mr. Eliasson repeats that there must be a division of labour among all the actors. "It would be foolish to look to the UN alone to resolve such crises." A single child's death is a failure for all concerned, "so we must all mobilize all efforts to bring about relief and development."

In this task, the UN has a very central role. "It is the whole embodiment of the idea that we are one earth, one globe, that we belong together and that solidarity, and even enlightened self interest, requires global cooperation. Bringing about such cooperation is the special challenge of all those working in the UN." □

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